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SUBJECT: COUNCIL OF EUROPE: STRUGGLING OVER ACCESS IN GEORGIA'S
BREAKAWAY REGIONS

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REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (U) Summary: The Council of Europe (COE) discussed Russia-Georgia September 9. Russia called for direct dialogue between the international community and authorities from South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Georgia noted that Russia continues to violate its ceasefire commitments, including by denying the EUMM access to the "occupied territories." Separately, EU President Sweden read an EU statement on violence against journalists and human rights defenders in Russia. The Russian Ambassador acknowledged a problem but stressed that "vested interests inside and outside Russia" were involved. End summary

¶2. (U) After the August hiatus, the COE's Council of Ministers' deputies (resident ambassadors) met September 9. Most substantive discussion centered on the consequences of the war between Russia and Georgia. Corien Jonker (Netherlands), the Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) Chair of the Committee on Migration, Refugees, and Population, called on all parties to delink access for international organizations and the displaced populations in the area from politics. Underscoring that the COE "should not be held hostage" by any side, she reiterated several times the need to delink access from status issues. Absent such a delinkage, there will be "no progress" on most humanitarian issues in the region. Responding to questions, Jonker said that the Geneva process has been unable to help promote human rights in the region. She stressed that she had been able to visit South Ossetia and that South Ossetia is turning into a "guerrilla society," with NGOs under increasing control by the authorities.

¶3. (U) EU President Sweden read a statement that, inter alia, supported the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence of Georgia. It also urged restraint in Georgia's territorial waters. Turkey noted that, after the Turkish FM's visit to Tbilisi September 7-8, Ankara is convinced that the recent detention of a Turkish vessel "in international waters" by Georgian authorities is the "last" incident of its kind and urged Georgia to prevent similar incidents.

¶4. (U) The Russian ambassador said Moscow's position is well known. He called for a direct dialogue between the international community and authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In this vein, the strengthening of civil society through dialogue "is essential." Russia, he stressed, had never blocked access. Rather, access had been blocked by one country (Georgia) and yet the COE still talks of monitoring Russia, he added indignantly. Georgia responded by noting that the OSCE and UN mandates were ended by Russia. Likewise, Russia is not allowing the EUMM into the "occupied territories." Russia has no intention of honoring both its ceasefire and its COE commitments, the Georgian delegation added.

¶5. (U) In a separate discussion, Sweden/EU and France called on Russia to investigate the recent murders of human rights defenders and journalists in Russia. Such investigations should be transparent and lead to the detention and trial of the

perpetrators. The Russian ambassador replied that Russia does, indeed, have a problem. However, he noted that others, including state officials and soldiers, had also been killed. The Russian Government is doing its utmost to investigate these crimes. He claimed that "vested interests inside and outside Russia, and organized crime, are involved." Thus, obtaining answers is not always easy. In a swipe to the Swedes, he added that the assassination of Swedish PM Palme is still unsolved.

¶6. (C) Comment: The COE continues to spin its wheels over Russia and Georgia without producing many concrete results from its thirteen months of debate. Only one minor concrete step was proposed during the September 9 session - that of seconding a COE human rights expert permanently to the EUMM (COE experts had provided some human rights training to the EUMM). PACE Committee Chair Jonker's appeal that she wanted to focus on access and did not want to talk politics appeared naove at best. Russia can be expected to continue to manipulate its ability to control access to the breakaway republics, particularly whenever the COE talks of increased monitoring of Russia's COE commitments.

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